

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Frederick Douglass

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Born into slavery in Maryland circa 1818, Frederick Douglass would go on to become one of the engineers of the peculiar institution's ultimate demise and one of the most famous black Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Douglass escaped from bondage as a young man and dedicated himself to the abolition of American chattel slavery. His work as an abolitionist lecturer and newspaper editor helped provoke a sectional split and helped ensure that emancipation would be a primary outcome of the Civil War. He continued to combat the effects of racial slavery, as manifested in widespread white resistance to black sociopolitical equality, and other injustices, such as the denial of women's right to vote, until his death in 1895. Douglass' life, as biographer William S. McFeely has noted, was characterized by an "unswerving commitment to human dignity and equality."<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of his life, Douglass shifted his views on a number of issues. The abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison went from his cherished mentor in the 1840s to his personal enemy by the 1850s. Political participation and militancy, once one of Douglass' chief bugaboos, became central to his abolitionist efforts by the time of the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln, the subject of Douglass' mistrust and ridicule at the start of the war, became the object of the abolitionists' respect and admiration by its end. Yet one continuous thread ran through all of Douglass' actions—moral patriotism. Douglass believed in the potential of the United States to become the beacon for global democracy. To become that lighthouse for the world, however, the nation needed to reestablish itself on the moral foundations of the Declaration of Independence. Douglass dedicated his life to the creation of a more inclusive—and more perfect—Union that extended full equality to African Americans and women.

### Early Life

Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey on the Eastern Shore of Maryland around the year 1818. His mother, Harriet, was a slave who was sold away from Douglass to a neighboring plantation soon after his birth. Douglass would only see her on a handful of nighttime visits as a result. His father was most likely his white master, Captain Aaron Anthony, a clerk for the large-scale tobacco planter Colonel Edward Lloyd. It was as a child that Douglass, as he would recall in his 1845

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<sup>1</sup> William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 384.

slave narrative, first witnessed the “hell of slavery” in the form of Anthony habitually whipping his aunt until “she was literally covered with blood.” He was raised by his maternal grandmother in a shack on Lloyd’s main plantation, barely surviving on meager food and clothing rations.<sup>2</sup>

At age seven or eight, Anthony lent Douglass as a house slave to his son-in-law’s brother, Hugh Auld of Baltimore. It was in the house of Auld and his wife Sophia that young Douglass grasped the extent to which the peculiar institution warped white Southern society. Sophia, who Douglass described in his 1845 narrative as a “kind and tender-hearted woman,” had never held a slave before. She treated Douglass “as she supposed one human being ought to treat another.” Sophia even began to teach Douglass how to read and write. When her cruel husband discovered Sophia’s actions, he scolded her for violating the cardinal sin of slaveholding. Illiteracy kept slaves in a manageable state, whereas slaves empowered with education were uncontrollable. A chastened Sophia abandoned her efforts and, over the course of seven years’ experience of absolute power over another human being, her “tender heart became stone.” Indeed, Douglass recalled that she became even more brutal than her husband. In the end, the corrupting power of slavery transformed even the purest of masters into tyrants.<sup>3</sup>

Douglass’ experiences with the Aulds, while harsh, also taught him the means of his eventual escape from the grasp of slavery. On the one hand, he recognized the relative freedom of movement of urban slaves. On the other hand, Auld’s lecture on slave illiteracy revealed to Douglass the mechanism as the heart of slaveholders’ power. Education would be a milestone on his “pathway from slavery to freedom.” By exchanging bread for lessons with white street children and memorizing the markings on pieces of timber in the Baltimore shipyards, Douglass spent the next few years teaching himself to read and write. By the age of twelve he was reading Baltimore newspapers warning of the dangers that abolitionists posed to white Southern society. Douglass, now aware of the possibility of a better life north of the Mason-Dixon Line, bided his time until the opportune moment for escape arrived.<sup>4</sup>

In the years living with Hugh Auld, Douglass’ first master died and he passed into the ownership of Hugh’s brother Thomas. After having a falling out with his brother in 1832, Thomas Auld brought Douglass to his rural plantation. Captain Auld, as he was called, was an upwardly mobile farmer who had moved into the slaveholding ranks from poverty. He was also a born-again Christian who frequented Methodist revivalist meetings. He would quote passages from Scripture that sanctioned slaveholding as he whipped his slaves, including the increasingly rebellious Douglass himself.

## Rebellion

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1845), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 39-40.

<sup>4</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 36.

By 1833 Captain Auld, fed up with the defiant Douglass, lent him to Edward Covey, a poor farmer with a notorious reputation as a slave-breaker. Douglass at first spent his time with Covey enduring constant whipping and longing that he could sail away on the ships in the distance. While carrying wheat six months into his stay, Douglass collapsed from exhaustion. Rather than endure the brutality of Covey, he escaped to seek the protection of Captain Auld, but to no avail. The following day, Douglass, emboldened by the supposed power of a root given to him by a fellow slave, decided to confront Covey. When Covey attempted to attack him, Douglass fought back and gained the upper hand. He beat Covey to the extent that Covey abandoned all attempts at disciplining Douglass for the remainder of his time there.

In his slave narrative, Douglass would cast his fight with Covey as another milestone on his path to freedom. Freedom, as Douglass argued in his later narrative, required self-empowerment. While education was an empowering tool, Douglass still lacked a sense of dignity—a feeling that he identified in gendered terms as manhood. Slavery emasculated him, depriving him of what he felt were the essential masculine tasks of defending himself and his family. Through the fight with Covey, Douglass the slave “was made a man.” Indeed, Douglass cast the episode in his 1845 narrative in gendered terms of violent conquest. By causing Covey’s “blood to run,” Douglass both gained his manhood and emasculated his opponent, to the point that the effeminized Covey “trembled like a leaf.” Douglass’ victory was a “glorious resurrection” of his humanity that made him resolve that, “however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.” While Douglass would struggle throughout his life over the necessity of violence in the fight against slavery, he nevertheless placed graphically physical resistance at the core of his personal narrative arc.<sup>5</sup>

## Escape

In 1834, Captain Auld lent Douglass to the farmer William Freeland. At Freeland’s plantation, Douglass gathered other slaves and organized a plan to escape north. The white authorities discovered and foiled the plot, and Douglass was sent to a slave jail. Following the attempted escape, Captain Auld decided to lend Douglass again to his brother Hugh. Douglass returned to Baltimore in 1835 and, as was typical for urban slaves, was hired out to learn a trade. The teenager was apprenticed to a series of shipbuilders, delivering the pay he earned as a carpenter and caulker to his master. Violence again played a central role in his slave narrative as he and fellow black workers fought against working-class white workers angered at the prospect of African Americans taking their jobs. It was also on the docks in 1837 that Douglass met Anna Murray, a free black housekeeper and laundress. The two fell in love, and Murray’s free status pushed Douglass further towards escaping his bonds as soon as possible.

Another opportunity for escape presented itself the following year. Douglass convinced Auld to let him hire himself out on new terms, by which Douglass would give

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<sup>5</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 68-74.

Auld a portion of his earnings and keep the rest for himself. Auld, as Douglass explained, was not being benevolent: he was relieving himself of the responsibility of providing for Douglass. Yet Douglass relished the self-sufficiency that came as a result. His freedom of movement also improved the prospects of a successful escape. In September, Douglass was able to escape to Philadelphia and then New York by sea and rail disguised as a free black sailor. Murray provided him with the sailor's uniform and money, while a free black friend gave him the proper identification papers. At the age of twenty-one, Douglass had finally attained freedom.

### **First Years of Freedom**

Once in New York, Douglass called for Murray to join him and the two married. The couple, calling themselves the Johnsons, sought the help of David Ruggles, a black abolitionist and leading organizer of the network of secret routes and safe houses for fugitive slaves known as the Underground Railroad. Ruggles sent them to live in New Bedford, Massachusetts under the protection of the black abolitionists Nathan and Mary Johnson. Due to the preponderance of Johnsons in the city, Douglass asked his benefactors to suggest a new surname. Mary Johnson, at the time reading Sir Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake*, suggested the name of a main character in the tale: Douglass.

The young fugitive soon gained employment in New Bedford as a sloop worker. Douglass, fed stories by slaveholders about the poverty and anarchy of the free North, was astonished at the wealth and order of his new city. He was impressed most of all by the self-sufficiency and solidarity of the free black community there. The Johnsons, he noted in his slave narrative, seemed better off than many of the slaveholders he had known. They and their neighbors protected each other from fugitive slave-catchers and channeled money into African American institutions, such as churches and schools. For Douglass, here were the fruits of the self-empowerment he had long sought to achieve: self-sufficiency within an enlightened and vibrant community. Douglass contributed to the community beginning in 1839 as a preacher and sexton in the local branch of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

As much as he cherished the notion of a self-determined black community with independent institutions, however, Douglass was no black separatist. While other African American reformers of the antebellum era, such as Martin Delany, advocated a black nation separate from whites, Douglass was a firm believer in integration. Throughout his life, he would advocate cooperation with white reformers in order to create a racially harmonious society.

### **Entering the Antislavery Sphere**

Douglass' first exposure to the world of organized antislavery reform came when he came across an issue of *The Liberator*, a newspaper published by the white radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, in 1839. Garrison, a Massachusetts journalist, had been inspired by the vociferous anti-colonization tracts of African Americans like David

Walker and James Forten to dedicate his life to abolition of slavery. With the founding of his newspaper in 1831 and the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, Garrison had begun the organized antislavery movement known as immediatist abolitionism, or immediatism.

As Douglass recalled in his 1845 slave narrative, *The Liberator* “became my meat and my drink.” The young man subscribed to the paper and imbibed the “principles, measure, and spirit” of immediatism. Immediatists, unlike the gradualist white reformers that came before them, advocated the immediate abolition to slavery and an end to racial prejudice in the North and South. All believed in some form of black citizenship within the United States. Garrison also specified the means to those ends: moral suasion, or appealing to the public to change its sinful ways through publications, petitions, and mass mailings. To Garrison and his followers, known variously as Garrisonians and “come-outers,” the extant political system was based on a pro-slavery Constitution, and was thus corrupt to its core. Reform thus required coming out of the political mainstream and advocating radical change from a position of moral purity.<sup>6</sup>

The Garrisonian position which was the most influential on Douglass’ subsequent worldview was the concept of moral patriotism. Garrisonians, like the rest of the country, combined revivalist fervor and nascent nationalism into a doctrine of American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States had a divinely inspired mandate to save the world from tyranny, ushering in a millenarian golden age. Unlike other Americans, however, Garrisonians believed that slavery prevented the nation from fulfilling its destiny. By redeeming the nation from this moral blight, reformers would enable the country to assume its rightful mantle. Immediatists thus cast themselves as patriots along the moralistic lines set forth by the Declaration of Independence. Douglass absorbed the notion of moral patriotism in full, and in time would adapt it to his own unique experiences as an African American and a former slave.

### **The Birth of a Reformer**

In 1839, Douglass began his reformist career by speaking out against colonization at local auxiliaries of the American Anti-Slavery Society. While prominent Americans such as Henry Clay cast the colonization of freed blacks in Africa as the solution to the problem of slavery, Douglass argued that integration, not expatriation, was the cure to the nation’s illness. Garrison published Douglass’ sentiments in a March 1839 issue of *The Liberator*. While Douglass would continue to attend meetings for the next few years, he did not attain prominence in the antislavery movement until a meeting on Nantucket Island in 1841. William Coffin, a white reformer who had heard Douglass previously at a meeting in New Bedford, recognized the twenty-three year old and convinced him to give a speech about his time as a slave.

Douglass put on a deft display of oratorical skill. He began with a deferential tone to draw in the mostly white audience, apologizing for his lack of learned polish. He then

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<sup>6</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 114.

proceeded to captivate the audience with an eloquent account of his life. Present in the audience that day was none other than William Lloyd Garrison himself. As he recalled in his introduction to Douglass' 1845 slave narrative, Garrison recognized the "powerful impetus" that Douglass could provide to the abolitionist movement. For moral suasion to work, reformers had to expose the Northern populace to the horrors of slavery. A former slave's personal testimonies of slaveholding iniquity would go much further in this regard than the abstract generalities of Northern reformers. Moreover, Douglass' speech, underscored by the contrast between his humble preface and the soaring heights of his oratory, was a powerful counterweight to the pro-slavery argument that African Americans were incapable of rising above menial ignorance. Garrison thus recruited Douglass as a lecturer for the Massachusetts branch of the American Anti-Slavery Society and personally cultivated him as a rising star in the abolitionist movement.<sup>7</sup>

### **Douglass and the Pro-Slavery Backlash**

The young Douglass set forth on his new antislavery career in the "full gush of unsuspecting enthusiasm," as he would recall in an autobiography first published in 1881. He began as a subscription agent for *The Liberator* and soon became a featured lecturer. By 1843 Douglass was traveling on a whirlwind antislavery lecturing circuit with other reformers as part of the Garrisonians' "one hundred conventions" project, designed to plant the seeds of antislavery sentiment across the North. He quickly earned the respect of prominent abolitionists like Wendell Phillips and drew large crowds in antislavery regions like the burned-over district of Upstate New York. As Douglass implied in his recollection of his unsuspecting enthusiasm, however, he soon came to realize that antislavery Northerners were a minority. Indeed, Douglass began his antislavery career amid a fierce anti-abolitionist backlash in the North. Northern mobs, outraged by the racial mixing of abolitionist meetings and worried that the antislavery agitation would precipitate the destruction of the Union, met reformers with violence. Anti-abolitionist rioters murdered the antislavery newspaperman Elijah Lovejoy in Illinois in 1837 and burned down Pennsylvania Hall while the biracial Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society was meeting inside in 1838. Douglass experienced mob violence on his 1843 lecture tour in towns from Vermont to Indiana. A particularly fierce mob in Pendleton, Indiana focused their wrath on the African American on stage, breaking his hand amid a merciless beating. Douglass only survived thanks to the timely intervention of an antislavery Quaker, Neal Hardy as did fellow abolitionist William White whom Douglass later referred to as his brother.<sup>8</sup>

Less violent incidents also educated Douglass on the pro-slavery viciousness simmering across the North. The towns of Hartford, Connecticut and Grafton, Massachusetts refused to let him speak there. Douglass also encountered segregation on railways across New England, as he was forced to sit in the dingy "Jim Crow" car. On

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<sup>7</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, Preface to Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, x-xi.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His escape from Bondage, and his Complete History to the Present Time*, 1882 ed. (London: Christian Age Office, 1881), 184.

one occasion, Douglass bought a first-class ticket and refused to leave when asked by the conductor. A group of men attempted to remove him from the first-class car, but Douglass clung so tightly to his seat that he tore it and three others out before they were able to eject him. The train then purposely went past his destination without stopping as punishment for his disobedience.

## **The Slave Narrative**

Another sign of Northern racial prejudice was that audiences across the region refused to believe Douglass' accounts of his time in slavery. Many white Northerners could not believe that the system portrayed by Southern planters as noble and genteel was so vicious and cruel, especially because Douglass, still a fugitive slave, omitted specific names and locations from his recollections. To prove the veracity of his experiences, Douglass in 1845 published his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, with all the specifics included.

Slave narratives, as firsthand chronicles of the horrors of slavery, were essential tools in the abolitionist arsenal, and Douglass' chronicle fit comfortably into the genre. As instruments meant to turn the Northern public against slavery, slave narratives often employed common tropes. They included a letter of introduction from a white reformer vouching for the narrative's authenticity. They highlighted episodes of especial cruelty, such as whipping and slave auctions, and emphasized the evil of slaveholding by discussing the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholders and the corruption of once-pure Southern hearts. Their eloquence also reinforced the ability of African Americans to rise up from the ignominies of slavery. Douglass' narrative, while offering unique contributions such as his gendered triumph over Covey, checked all of these boxes. Garrison wrote a letter of introduction, and the Aulds fleshed out slaveholding iniquity.

The narrative caught the public eye. Thousands of copies sold within months, and Douglass skyrocketed in prominence. Many Northern newspapers reviewed the work positively, though some, along with Southern publications, doubted its provenance. One reviewer, a neighbor of Thomas Auld, argued that the slave he had known could not have written such an elegant tract. This review also indicated another problem: the Aulds now knew Douglass' true identity and his location, and could attempt to recapture him. Douglass' abolitionist friends, such as Garrison and Phillips, urged him to avert the danger by going on a lecturing tour of Great Britain and Ireland. The Garrisonians had allies in both regions, and hoped that Douglass could reinforce their antislavery efforts. Douglass thus set sail in August 1845.

## **Douglass Abroad**

Douglass spent the next two years traveling through Great Britain and Ireland. He lectured to large crowds in cities across the region, and also met with prominent reformers like the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell and the British architect of slave trade abolition, Thomas Clarkson. Douglass was astonished by the comparative lack of racial prejudice in Northern Europe. As he would note in his second autobiography in

1855, “I find myself regarded and treated at every turn with the kindness and deference paid to white people.” He could sit with whites in trains, dine with them at restaurants, and lodge with them in hotels.<sup>9</sup>

For Douglass, the relative racial progressiveness of the British Isles underscored the imperfections of the United States. Douglass emphasized constantly to his audiences the pro-slavery nature of the Constitution and the iniquities of American politicians. In a farewell speech in London in 1847, Douglass castigated the framers of the Constitution for “trafficking in the bodies and souls of their fellow-men” and thus refocusing American society to the “great falsehood” of human inequality. The nation had become uncivilized and unworthy of his praise. In criticizing the United States, however, he stressed that he was not forsaking it. Indeed, his experiences abroad helped Douglass develop his own brand of moral patriotism—one that cast African Americans as the only hope of redemption for a failed nation. In his same speech, Douglass cast the Declaration of Independence, which contained the “loudest and clearest assertions of the rights of man,” as his lodestone. It was the mission of African Americans, along with white allies, to force the nation back into compliance with the tenets of the Declaration. Douglass thus resolved to return home and continue his mission. His British friends, who raised the money to buy his freedom from Auld, enabled him to do so in 1847.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The North Star and Evolving Views***

Upon his return to the United States, Douglass moved to Rochester, New York and informed his mentor Garrison that he intended to start publishing a black abolitionist newspaper there. Garrison opposed the idea, perhaps out of fear that the paper would compete with the organs of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and his own *Liberator*. Nevertheless, Douglass began publishing the *North Star* in 1847. The weekly paper would serve as a vehicle for Douglass to preach abolition to whites and the need for dignified agitation to blacks. It allowed him to keep one foot in the biracial abolitionist movement and the other in the black community as a race leader speaking for his brethren.

That Douglass defied Garrison’s wishes was not surprising: for he was drifting apart from the Garrisonians by the end of the 1840s. The main catalyst was change within the moral suasionist movement. In 1840, abolitionist infighting over political participation and the importance of woman’s rights had split the immediatist movement in two. Splinter groups like the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society and the Liberty Party became advocates of political abolitionism, or fostering reform through abolitionist involvement in the political process. They no longer considered political participation to be sinful because they recast the Constitution as a fundamentally antislavery document abused for pro-slavery purposes by Democrats and Whigs. They

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1857 ed. (Auburn: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), 371.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Report of the Soiree Given to Frederick Douglass, London Tavern, March 30, 1847* (London: R. Yorke Clarke and Co., 1847), 16.



also refused to focus their efforts on woman's rights. The Garrisonians incorporated woman's rights into their efforts and doubled down on the program of moral suasion. Over time, they also came to espouse the doctrine of disunion—the refusal to accept a continued Northern union with Southern slaveholders. Garrison took to burning the Constitution on stage while arguing for the need to cut the slaveholding cancer from the nation.

Douglass fully agreed with the Garrisonian stance on woman's rights and, for the time, disunionism, but underwent an evolution of his views on political participation as he listened to the arguments of political abolitionists over the course of the 1840s. At a lecture in 1843, he soaked in the argument of the black preacher Henry Highland Garnet that political participation, rather than abstention, was the path to achieving reform. The abolitionist Lysander Spooner's 1845 book *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery*, which argued in detail that the Founders had created an antislavery Constitution, also helped persuade Douglass to reconsider his stance on the American political system.

### **The Split with Garrison**

Tensions between Douglass and Garrison simmered into the early 1850s. The two men drifted apart ideologically, while personal feelings of pride and loyalty also complicated their relationship. Douglass wanted to influence the antislavery debate as an independent voice, but Garrison believed that his protégée ought to follow the guidelines of his benefactor and mentor. Garrison took the publication of the *North Star* as an act of disloyalty. In the years afterwards, Douglass continued to chafe under what he saw as the patronizing control of Garrison. Finally, Douglass broke with his mentor and the American Anti-Slavery Society at the Society's annual meeting in 1851. In a speech before the gathering, Douglass announced his change of opinion on the Constitution, which he now regarded as an antislavery instrument. Garrison responded with a public diatribe against his former student. The relationship between the two men became one of personal bitterness, with each publicly insulting both the doctrines and character of the other.

No longer comfortable with, or welcome in, the Garrisonian movement, Douglass moved into the political abolitionist camp. He became one of the leading voices for the antislavery interpretation of the Constitution. The former slave also took aim at the doctrine of disunion as an act of surrender—a cowardly abandonment of Southern slaves to their fate. Bereft of his old allies, Garrison formed ties with leading advocates of abolitionist political participation like Gerrit Smith and William Goodell. Smith and Goodell were both leaders of the Liberty Party, an abolitionist political party that aimed to purify American politics from within. Douglass became a supporter of their efforts. He combined his *North Star* with Smith's *Liberty Party Paper* to form a new weekly newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, in 1851. Douglass also joined their efforts to merge the Liberty Party with the Free-Soil Party, a breakaway group of Democrats led by Martin Van Buren who opposed the extension of slavery into the Western territories. The Free Soilers were no abolitionists—they did not endorse emancipation and positively

rejected black rights—but the Liberty men hoped to move them to higher ground. Their attempts failed, but Douglass would continue to regard dialogue with more moderate antislavery political forces like the Free Soilers and, later, the Republicans to be a useful tool.

### **Douglass and Woman's Rights**

As Douglass came into his own as a powerful reformer in the late 1840s and early 1850s, he also became a leading advocate of woman's rights. Through his interactions with female abolitionists such as Elizabeth M'Clintock, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony in the reformist hotbed of Upstate New York, Douglass came to link the fight for abolition with the fight for woman's rights. He began to argue that in print and speeches that both African Americans and women deserved full inclusion in the American polity. "Right is of No Sex" became one of the chief mottos of his *North Star*.

Douglass came to play a crucial role in the emergence of an organized movement for woman's rights. Upon meeting M'Clintock at a local antislavery meeting in 1848, she invited him to an upcoming gathering of reformers at Seneca Falls. While the Seneca Falls Convention agreed on most of the contours of the struggle for woman's rights, including revising divorce and inheritance laws and combating the notion of separate and unequal spheres between men and women, its members hesitated to endorse women's suffrage. Suffrage, some felt, was a controversial issue that would alienate men from supporting the more palatable planks of the woman's rights platform. Douglass, the only African American present, swayed the meeting in favor of the motion by arguing that a woman deserved the right to vote just as much as he did.

### **Douglass and African Americans**

While Douglass acted as a prominent member of the biracial political abolitionist movement throughout the 1850s, he also considered himself to be a race leader—a spokesperson for and leader of African Americans, especially among his fellow free blacks in the North. He thus turned his attention to the issues roiling the free black community. Antebellum Northern blacks divided over the concepts of integration and separatism. Some, like Richard Allen, endorsed black communal pride while also favoring integration with whites. Others, like Martin Delany, envisioned a separate black nation with its own institutions and, eventually, a reconstituted polity in Haiti or Africa.

Douglass struggled to walk a fine line between supporting black collective self-assertion and opposing the radical black nationalist ideas of institutional separation and African emigration. He supported the National Negro Convention Movement, an attempt to give a voice to African American needs and opinions through large public gatherings. Douglass also advocated communal integrity among free blacks. Faced with adversity, they needed to band together in aid societies and self-defense organizations to survive. Moreover, Douglass argued that blacks needed to fight for their own rights and interests. Unless they asserted themselves to their white counterparts, nothing could change. Douglass tied black self-assertion to the doctrine of racial uplift—the elitist concept

popular among leading African Americans that Northern blacks had to prove their worth to whites through educational and economic improvement. As Douglass argued in an 1848 convention speech, “we can be improved and elevated only just so fast and far as we shall improve and elevate ourselves.” Through self-elevation, the free black community could win over Americans to their arguments and thus destroy slavery.<sup>11</sup>

For Douglass, black self-elevation was a path to integration within the American polity, rather than to separatism or emigration. Separatism, he felt, impeded the path to a more perfect Union by positing racial difference, rather than innate equality, as the basis for society. Indeed, separatism was the ally of those pro-slavery forces who denied African Americans the right to learn or commute alongside them. Only by abolishing racial distinctions could the nation overcome the baleful effects of slavery. Douglass thus became a prominent advocate of school desegregation in the North. For similar reasons, Douglass argued against colonization and emigration. He argued that emigration played into the hands of pro-slavery whites who wished to rid the land of free blacks. Douglass also believed firmly that the destiny of African Americans lay within the United States. African Americans, he argued, were Americans, with as much a right to the fruits of citizenship in the American nation as its white inhabitants. Into the 1850s, black emigration from their native land thus made no sense in Douglass’ mind.

### **The Coalescence of Douglass’ Moral Patriotism**

Of course, for Douglass, African Americans not only had a place in the United States, but also represented the nation’s salvation from the moral quagmire of slavery. Douglass’ moral patriotism coalesced into a coherent vision in the 1850s. In speeches and writings throughout the decade, Douglass stressed the need for Americans to return to the founding tenets envisioned in the Declaration of Independence—tenets that demanded the inclusion of African Americans as equal members of the nation—in order to save the country and the world. He paired visions of a bright future with fiery condemnation of the present, fallen state of the nation.

Douglass’ dialectic of hope and fury reached its rhetorical apex on July 5, 1852. Invited by the citizens of Rochester to deliver a Fourth of July oration, Douglass began along the typically celebratory lines of such speeches. The day, he noted, was one worthy of celebration. The Founding Fathers were “great men,” and their declaration of independence was the “ring-bolt in the chain of your yet undeveloped destiny.” That destiny, however, was undeveloped because African Americans were “not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary.” They were not privy to the blessings established by American independence. In a rising crescendo of fire, Douglass asked, “What, to the American slave, is your fourth of July?” It was a “hollow mockery” that epitomized the “national inconsistencies” of a hypocritical nation. Douglass thus could not celebrate the holiday alongside his white audience. Having contrasted the promise of the nation upon its founding in 1776 to its present depths, Douglass concluded “where I

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<sup>11</sup> Howard Brotz, ed., *African-American Social and Political Thought, 1850-1920* Transaction Publishers 1992 ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 204.

began, with hope.” The reformer, “drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence,” asserted that the nation was redeemable. The path forward, he instructed his audience, was to work for abolition and black rights. Only then could Douglass, as a moral patriot, celebrate the Fourth of July in the present alongside his fellow citizens.<sup>12</sup>

### **A New Autobiography and Family Life**

In 1855, Douglass published a second autobiography, entitled *My Bondage and My Freedom*. While his first autobiography was a slave narrative, his second created a narrative arc from slave to freedman to famous activist. He chronicled his burgeoning career in detail and showcased his intellectual contributions to the antislavery and woman’s rights movements. By highlighting the heights to which he had ascended, Douglass made a case for his inclusion in the pantheon of great American reformers. He was, as the book implied, a man that present and future generations of Americans need remember.

While Douglass presented his public life in polished form to the outside world, his private life received little mention in the autobiography. In part, Douglass’ narrative choice was due to the Victorian ethos of the age. It also, however, reflected the tensions in his life. In the first years of their marriage, Anna had borne Douglass five children and supported his meager lecturing income by working as a laundress. Douglass worked to cultivate a reformist spirit in his children, employing them in his publishing business at the *North Star*. As he rose in prominent social circles, however, Douglass grew apart from his wife, whom he perceived as uneducated. He generated scandal by spending extended periods of time with female reform colleagues like Julia Griffiths and Ottilie Assing. That Anna played a much smaller role in his autobiography than she did in his real life, as the rock of his family and loyal supporter of his career, reflects his attempts to excise her from his consciously crafted public image.

### **The Coming of the Civil War**

As a prominent abolitionist, Douglass played an important role in the sectional tensions that ultimately precipitated the Civil War. While antebellum abolitionists remained small in number, their conspicuous actions provoked outsized fears among pro-slavery Southerners. Southern insecurity begot aggressive actions, such as the Congressional gag rule and the Fugitive Slave Act, which in turn pushed more Northerners towards an antislavery stance. Abolitionists’ perceived extremism left space for moderate antislavery forces like the Republicans to gain traction as sensible alternatives, which provoked further Southern paranoia. This escalating cycle of fear and backlashes would eventually end in disunion in 1861.

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<sup>12</sup> Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”, July 5, 1852, in *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, edited by Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 137-158.

For abolitionists living amid rising sectional tensions in the 1850s, however, the tide seemed to be turning towards a more virulently pro-slavery Union. The Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, and the Dred Scott Decision all indicated the expansion of the Slave Power. After decades of work for seemingly no gain, many abolitionists became frustrated with the pace of change in the country. Two trends in reform emerged over the decade—the black emigration movement experienced a revival and advocates of militant antislavery action like John Brown gained newfound influence. To a degree, Douglass acceded to both. Though he refused to endorse emigration, he admitted in his newspaper that he could no longer oppose the decisions of individual African Americans to escape unceasing persecution in the United States. At the same time, he flirted with funding Brown’s fated expedition to launch a slave insurrection in Harper’s Ferry in 1859. Though he decided against doing so, that he considered such a plan at all indicated Douglass’ shift away from the Garrisonian position of peaceful non-resistance towards the accepting violence as a means of change.

### **Douglass and the Republicans**

One of the results of the Northern backlash to pro-slavery aggression in the years before the Civil War was the formation of the Republican Party, formed in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The Republican Party was a moderately antislavery force that took up the Free Soil position of slavery non-extension but went no further. The party gained traction to the point that it was the dominant political force in the North by the end of the decade.

Like most abolitionists, Douglass was ambivalent about the Republicans and their standard-bearers. On the one hand, the Republicans were an imperfect manifestation of antislavery reform. They were not abolitionists: they said nothing about emancipation, nor black rights. The small Radical Abolition Party of Gerrit Smith was the true moral force in politics. On the other hand, however, reformers could not deny that the emergence of the Republican Party was a sign of antislavery progress. Northerners who cast abolition as treasonous in the 1830s now backed candidates who opposed the extension of slavery in new territories and states. Moreover, the Republicans were less immoral than the political wing of the Slave Power, the Democratic Party.

Douglass decided to straddle the line between criticizing the Republicans and tacitly lending them his support as the best means available for attenuating the influence of slavery. He worked as a Radical Abolition Party activist and condemned the shortcomings of the Republicans. During the election of 1860, Douglass refused to vote for Abraham Lincoln because of the candidate’s upholding of the Fugitive Slave Law and his guarantee that slavery would remain in the areas where it already existed. Yet the reformer also proclaimed in his newspaper that a Republican victory was preferable to the alternative. Indeed, Lincoln, widely perceived as a country bumpkin and political naïf, could prove a pliable tool for abolitionists. While Douglass by no means trusted or even respected Lincoln, he thus rejoiced in the Republican’s victory in November 1860 as a milestone for national antislavery progress.

## **The Outbreak of Civil War**

As seven states seceded after Lincoln's election and formed the Confederate States of America, Douglass spoke out against both peaceful separation, which he still considered a betrayal of Southern slaves, and sectional compromise, which he felt would strengthen the Slave Power. He railed against Lincoln for endorsing a constitutional amendment guaranteeing the existence of slavery in its current borders. As Lincoln took office in March 1861, Douglass gazed upon him with a wary eye, worried that he would crumple under pro-slavery pressure.

The Confederate firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861 and President Lincoln's subsequent call for troops to suppress the domestic insurrection changed Douglass' perspective entirely. Lincoln was no longer a weakling on the verge of appeasing the Slave Power, but was now the leader at the head of a vast war effort to restore the Union. At the same time, the Republican Party and the Union war became intertwined, so that criticizing Lincoln also implied an attack on the soldiers prosecuting the fight and the civilians supporting them. Douglass thus began to tone down his criticism of the President.

At the start of the conflict, however, Douglass' hopes lay not in Lincoln himself but in the transformative power of war. The reformer believed that the Union war could become the crucible that birthed a new, morally pure nation. The redemption of the country seemed to be at hand. In the interests of defeating a Confederacy fueled by slavery, the Union would adopt ever more radical antislavery measures. The result would be a dethroned Slave Power and an enlightened North ready to lead the reunited nation into a moral golden age. Douglass thus became a full-throated supporter of the Union war.

## **Douglass and the Civil War**

In his quest to turn the Union war into a moral crucible, Douglass mended bridges with old allies. At the outbreak of the Civil War, moral suasionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips recognized the antislavery potential of the conflict and entered the pro-war fray. While social relations between Garrison and Douglass remained awkward, the two men agreed that the times demanded a united antislavery front. They also recognized that their antebellum moral arguments alone would not win the Union public over to emancipation. Most Northerners fought the war to restore the Union rather than to destroy slavery. Abolitionists thus adopted utilitarian language in the hope that actions done for the sake of expediency could produce moral outcomes. In this venture, they allied with radical Republicans and other so-called emancipationists, who advocated emancipation solely as a means to Union victory. Together, abolitionists and emancipationists stressed two main arguments. First, they emphasized that slavery was the cause of the war—the source of sectional discontent and the engine of Confederate power. Second, they argued that the war power clause of the Constitution gave leaders the ability to abolish slavery as a means of defeating the rebellion.

To a much greater extent than his white allies, Douglass proffered a third argument: the necessity of black enlistment. In expedient terms, he argued that black troops would tip the scales in the internecine conflict. Black enlistment, however, was more than a utilitarian instrument in Douglass' mind: it was the key to an integrated nation. In gendered terms, Douglass declared that soldiering would let freedmen regain their manhood, much as he had in his fight against Covey. Moreover, military service would convince the public of African Americans' bravery and patriotism, thereby paving the way for black citizenship rights. Douglass thus hounded the government to accept black enlistment while also urging his fellow African Americans to prepare for the moment in which they could prove their worth once and for all.

Douglass proved influential in the enactment of emancipation and black enlistment. By popularizing the war power argument, abolitionists provided the Lincoln Administration with a ready-made tool for victory when, in the aftermath of the failed march on Richmond in spring 1862, it embraced a more aggressive prosecution of the conflict. Douglass' couching of black enlistment in terms of expediency and patriotism also helped legitimate the option in the eyes of the white public. The text of the final Emancipation Proclamation issued on January 1, 1863, which decreed the emancipation of Confederate slaves and called for black troops, thus owed much to the efforts of Douglass and his allies. Douglass became a military recruiter for black regiments such as the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, in which his sons Charles and Lewis enlisted.

For Douglass, the Emancipation Proclamation was not the end of abolitionists' efforts but a wedge towards a more perfect Union—a starting point from which abolitionists could turn a utilitarian nation into a righteous one, founded on the principles of justice and human equality. Events over the later years of the war, such as the New York City Draft Riots in 1863 and the reluctance of the Lincoln Administration to provide equal pay for black troops and commission black officers, convinced Douglass that the path ahead was a long one. Other abolitionists, however, did not agree. By the time of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, Garrison had come to believe that the antislavery mission ended with total emancipation. The founder of the American Anti-Slavery thus left organized abolitionism. Douglass became one of an increasingly small number of reformers arguing that abolitionists needed to keep fighting until black citizenship and equality became touchstones of the re-founded nation.

## **Douglass and Lincoln**

Over the course of the Civil War and into historical memory, Douglass had a complicated relationship with Abraham Lincoln. While Douglass in 1861 had high hopes for the possibilities the Union war presented, towards Lincoln himself the abolitionist felt little more than distrust and condescending derision. Douglass cast himself as the gadfly in the President's side—the unrelenting reformer who would push the reluctant politician onto higher ground step by step. The abolitionist did not hesitate to condemn Lincoln for revoking the military emancipation edicts of Major Generals John C. Frémont and David

Hunter in fall 1861 and spring 1862, respectively, or for advocating colonization in a notorious meeting with black community leaders in fall 1862.

By the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, however, Douglass had come to respect the President as an ally in the fight against slavery and its effects. Douglass met with Lincoln on the President's personal invitation on a number of occasions, starting in August 1863. As he lobbied Lincoln for continued momentum on black enlistment and total emancipation, Douglass was struck by the President's moral growth over the course of the war. The same man who had once proclaimed that he would save the Union with or without slavery now treated Douglass as an equal and, as the reformer later recalled, displayed in private a "deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him." The tide of antislavery progress, it seemed, had carried Lincoln along with the rest of the country.<sup>13</sup>

Despite his personal respect for Lincoln by the later years of the Civil War, Douglass still clashed with the President on a number of issues. In the months before the presidential election of 1864, Douglass chastised Lincoln for moving too slowly on equal pay for black troops and a post-emancipation vision for the place of African Americans in the nation. Indeed, Douglass flirted briefly with supporting the third-party candidacy of John C. Frémont over Lincoln in 1864. The reformer ultimately backed the President, however, as the best option available. Douglass, as James Oakes has explained, "eventually came to think of Lincoln as both a good friend and a great man."<sup>14</sup>

Lincoln's assassination in April 1865 and the subsequent chaos of the Reconstruction Era further convinced Douglass that Lincoln had presented the best opportunity for the integration of African Americans into a reunited nation. Douglass expressed his opinion of Lincoln most clearly in a speech dedicating the Freedman's Monument in Washington, D.C. in 1876. Lincoln, Douglass admitted, had been a "white man's president" who shared in the general prejudices against African Americans. For all his shortcomings, however, Lincoln had dedicated himself to the "high mission" of wiping the stain of slavery from the face of the nation. Slow as he seemed in doing so, Lincoln moved as fast as the country would allow. While Douglass' "faith in him" as the creator of a more perfect Union was "often taxed and strained to the uttermost," it had "never failed." The reformer thereby cast the loss of Lincoln as a detriment to both the nation as a whole and to the African American race in particular.<sup>15</sup>

## Reconstruction

Douglass spoke so wistfully of Abraham Lincoln in 1876 in part because of the events in the aftermath of the Civil War. The bloody period of Reconstruction pitted a

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<sup>13</sup> James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 232.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>15</sup> Speech of Frederick Douglass, 14 April 1876, *Teaching American History*, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/oration-in-memory-of-abraham-lincoln/> (accessed September 30, 2014).



tenuous coalition of freedmen and Republicans against Democratic Redeemers and their armed wing, which included such groups as the Ku Klux Klan. Douglass became a public supporter of the Republican Party and its leaders, such as Ulysses S. Grant. To Douglass, the Republicans were far from perfect moral instruments. Indeed, Republicans wanted to extricate themselves from the mire of Southern intervention as quickly as possible. Yet the alternative—the victory of white supremacy in the South and the perhaps indefinite delay of a more perfect Union—left Douglass no choice. The reformer thus worked to shore up the Reconstruction coalition. In his newspaper founded in 1870, the *New National Era*, he stressed that African Americans did not demand special treatment, as Redeemers claimed; rather, they asked for an equal playing field alongside the rest of the country. If left the opportunity to pursue the same avenues of socioeconomic and political advancement as whites, blacks would quickly prove themselves worthy of full citizenship.

For all his efforts, however, Douglass could not prevent the promise of Reconstruction from fading. As white Southern resistance ground on for years after the official end of the Civil War, and as new issues like labor strife came to the fore, the majority of Northerners lost interest in sustaining a radical Reconstruction program. Even Douglass' old friends Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, with whom Douglass had formed the Equal Rights Association after the war to fight for women's and black suffrage, turned against African American rights after the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments excluded women from their purviews. By the time of the official end of Reconstruction in 1877, Douglass was one of the lone voices left arguing that the path towards the great American destiny was still blocked.

Douglass also became an increasingly isolated voice within the strains of Civil War memory. In the decades after the Civil War, the Confederate version of the Civil War known as the Lost Cause came to prominence across the entire nation. Lost Cause practitioners erased slavery from the war entirely: the conflict had been fought over states' rights, and its chief product had been the mutual valor of white Union and Confederate soldiers. Douglass fought against this seductive narrative in numerous speeches to Union veterans, reminding them that they had gone to war because of slavery and had accomplished the great feat of destroying the peculiar institution once and for all. Such an achievement, he argued, should represent the true source of their pride in remembering the war. In a nation weary of strife and eager for reunion, however, Douglass' pleas fell increasingly on deaf ears.

## Later Years

Douglass' personal life underwent a series of shifts in his later years. While visiting a friend in Maryland in 1877, Douglass received an invitation from his former master Thomas Auld, then on his deathbed, to visit. Douglass had reconciled previously with Auld's daughter, Amanda Auld Sears, who had attended and cheered one of his speeches on civil rights in 1866. Still, as he recalled in his autobiography, Douglass "could never have thought possible" that he and Thomas Auld would meet again. Now

that "slavery was destroyed, and the slave and the master stood upon equal ground," however, Douglass decided to accept the invitation. The two men met and reconciled, seeming to put the past behind them. Auld, according to Douglass, told his former slave that he was "too smart to be a slave, and had I been in your place I should have done as you did." Douglass, on his part, informed Auld that he "did not run away from *you*, but from *slavery*." The men parted on good terms after their mutual whitewashing of their past acrimonious relationship, and Auld died soon after. The reformer moved his family that same year to the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, D.C., where he completed his final autobiography, covering the postwar years in depth, in 1881. Douglass' wife Anne Murray died the following year. In the aftermath of her death, Douglass drew closer to Helen Pitts, a white woman's rights activist who was the daughter of a reformer colleague and was twenty years his junior. The interracial marriage caused a media scandal and also alienated Douglass from his children.<sup>16</sup>

Despite personal upheavals, Douglass remained a respective public figure in the decades before his death. He undertook a series of ventures, serving as president of the Freedman's Savings Bank in 1874, as the United States Marshal for the District of Columbia from 1877 to 1881, and as the United States minister-in-residence in Haiti from 1889 to 1890. Douglass continued to fight for the moral nation he had long envisioned. He remained an ardent supporter of the woman's rights movement despite his disagreements with Stanton and Anthony and took up such international causes as Irish Home Rule. The reformer also maintained his role as a race leader by speaking out against both white supremacy and black separatist movements, such as the Exoduster migration to Kansas in 1879 and the Back to Africa movement of the 1890s. Frederick Douglass died of natural causes on February 20, 1895, shortly after returning home from a speech at a woman's rights convention.

## Conclusion

Frederick Douglass was a man who incited controversy throughout his life, whether through his refusal to remain a slave, his far-reaching espousal of black rights, his rejection of separatist and emigrationist movements, or even his interracial marriage. His was a dynamic life full of dramatic shifts of opinion, such as on political involvement, violence, and the Lincoln Administration. Whatever the adversity he incurred and whatever ideological changes he experienced, however, Douglass continually devoted his full energies to his vision of a perfected United States—one that embraced diversity as its true strength. Douglass did not live to see that dream fulfilled, but his words and deeds paved the way for those who would continue the struggle for egalitarianism into the twentieth century and beyond.

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<sup>16</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 445-9.

### Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey later Frederick Douglass

Born	Circa 1818, Talbot County Maryland. (He chose to celebrate his birthday on February 14.)
Died	February 20, 1895, Washington D.C.
Buried	Mount Hope Cemetery Rochester New York
Father	Unknown but likely his first master Captain Aaron Anthony
Mother	Harriet Bailey
Career Milestones	1833 Fought and beat his master Edward Covey   1835 escaped to Philadelphia then New York   1839, began his reformist career by speaking out against colonization at local auxiliaries of the American Anti-Slavery Society   1841 gave his first speech on his life as a slave   1845 published his first autobiography <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i>   1845-1847 lecture tour in the British Isles   1847 purchased his freedom   1847 began publishing a black abolitionist newspaper the <i>North Star</i> in Rochester New York   1851 combined the <i>North Star</i> with another newspaper and began publishing <i>Frederick Douglass' Paper</i>   1855 published his second autobiography <i>My Bondage and My Freedom</i>   1859 met with John Brown and refused to fund his raid on Harper's Ferry; fled to Canada for his safety after the raid   1863 became an agent for the United States government to recruit African-American soldiers into the Union army; met with President Abraham Lincoln at the White House to discuss discrimination against African American troops   1870 founded the <i>New National Era</i> newspaper   1874 appointed President of the Freedmen's Savings Bank   1876 keynote speaker at the dedication of the Freedman's Memorial in Washington D.C.   1877-1881 served as United States Marshal for the District of Columbia   1878 purchased an estate in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington D.C. called Cedar Hill   1881 published his third autobiography <i>The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His escape from Bondage, and his Complete History to the Present Time</i>   1889-1891 served as United States Minister in Residence for Haiti.

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